



Giffords Focuses on Afghanistan

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Health care and border issues have been stealing the headlines, but U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., has been giving plenty of attention lately to Afghanistan, a part of the world she says was ignored far too long.

Her comment, of course, was a thinly veiled swipe at the Bush administration's hyper-focused attention on Baghdad. But it's not far off the mark.

The U.S. and its allies went into Afghanistan almost eight years ago, just weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks. The goal was to take down the Taliban for sheltering al-Qaida leaders who planned the attacks on American soil. Initially, U.S. forces knocked the Taliban off balance, but the terrorists regrouped and have come roaring back — and their resurgence has come at a price. About 750 members of the U.S. military have died in Afghanistan and the region since the invasion.

Giffords returned Tuesday night from a four-day trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan, her second in less than a month. As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, she has made the 20-hour flight to, literally, the other side of the world several times.

The burning question now seems to be whether there is a timeline for a U.S. exit, but Giffords thinks it's the wrong question. She expects to be briefed this week by top military leaders on an exit strategy but didn't think it would include a hard timeline.

"I think it's premature to discuss leaving Afghanistan when we're now giving the country our full attention," she told the Green Valley News this week. "I believe this mission is important."

But support at home and abroad is waning, and there are questions about whether additional troops will solve any problems there. And a questionable election last month that still isn't resolved didn't say much for the Afghans' ability to take charge of their own destiny — something Giffords says is vital.

She's not sold on the whole program, but is committed to the mission.

"There's a growing debate about what constitutes success in Afghanistan," she said. "I have serious questions about our approach, but I think picking up and leaving is simply not an option."

The good news out of the region is that the cultivation of opium poppies — a major revenue source for the Taliban — is down 22 percent, according to Giffords. Actual production is down 10 percent. The terrorist group gets about half its funding from the sales of poppies, according to intelligence.

Still, the country's porous borders mean 98 percent to 99 percent of the drug is getting out.

Giffords, who says about 10 percent of those in Afghanistan support the Taliban, isn't a Pollyana, particularly after coming off the deadliest month for U.S. troops, when we lost 51 in August. But after watching elite Afghan special forces train, and hearing briefings in Pakistan and Afghanistan, she sees an eventual victory.

"But the Afghan people have to be a part of it," she said.

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